Transforming the Classroom
Supporting Trans Young People in Schools
GLOSSARY

Cisgender: A non-trans person (i.e. a person whose gender identity and gender expression is aligned with the sex assigned at birth).

Gender Identity: Refers to a person’s deeply-felt identification as male, female or some other gender. This may or may not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender Expression: The external manifestation of a person’s gender identity. Gender can be expressed through clothing, manners, grooming, physical characteristics, social interactions and speech patterns.

Non-binary: Refers to gender identities that fall outside the gender binary of male or female. This includes people whose gender identity is neither exclusively male nor female, a combination of male and female or between or beyond genders.

Sexual Orientation: Refers to a person’s physical, emotional or romantic attraction to another person. Sexual orientation is distinct from sex, gender identity and gender expression. Trans people may identify as lesbian, gay, heterosexual, bisexual or asexual.

Transgender or Trans: Refers to a person whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex assigned to them at birth. This term can include diverse gender identities.

Transition: A process through which some trans people begin to live as the gender with which they identify, rather than the one assigned at birth. Social transition describes when trans people take social steps to express their gender identity. This could include using a nickname or different pronoun or changing their style of clothes or haircut to more accurately reflect their gender identity. Legal transition refers to changing the name or gender-marker on legal documents (e.g. birth certificate, driving licence or passport). Medical transition refers to medical interventions (e.g. through hormones or surgery).

Transphobia: The fear, dislike or hatred of people who are trans or are perceived to challenge conventional gender categories of male or female. Transphobia can result in individual and institutional discrimination, prejudice and violence against trans people.
ABOUT TENI

TENI is a non-profit organisation supporting the trans community in Ireland. TENI seeks to improve the situation and advance the rights and equality of trans people and their families. Our vision is an Ireland where trans people are understood, accepted and respected, and can participate fully in all aspects of Irish society.

IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY SUPPORT

Family support is crucial in ensuring that trans young people can thrive. Many parents or families do not know what to do when their child tells them they are questioning their gender identity or that they are transgender. TENI is the first port of call for many of these families who are seeking support and information.

In 2015, TENI was contacted 240 times by families in relation to trans children or gender questioning young people. This equates to approximately 20 times/month. In 2014, TENI was contacted 14 times/month by parents, illustrating a significant increase in contact with the organisation.

The parents who contact TENI tell us that their children are as young as three years old but most range between 12-17 years of age. When the families contact TENI they are generally experiencing many complex emotions: stress, anxiety, confusion, depression, frustration and/or anger in trying to cope with their child’s gender identity or expression. In certain cases these family members, and particularly their children, are in crisis and may be self-harming or expressing suicidality. Research shows that the existence of family support dramatically improves the experience of trans people. TENI can aid families in obtaining relevant support.

TENI regularly provides trans awareness training in primary and post-primary schools. In most cases, this occurs on request of a family whose child is in the process of coming out or transitioning. In our experience, clear and confident leadership shown by management can be the difference between a student remaining in the education system or simply withdrawing. That confident leadership very often evolves from accessing accurate information and training from TENI. We are available to provide individual consultations and tailored trainings.

INTRODUCTION

Trans people are becoming increasingly visible in Irish society and there is a growing awareness of issues related to gender identity. As a consequence of this more young people are finding the courage to come out and transition while in schools. For many young trans people, an early transition can dramatically improve their quality of life. The opportunity to live an authentic life is critical to young people's mental health and wellbeing.

The Gender Recognition Act that was passed in July 2015 formally recognises trans people in their preferred gender. This has been an incredible step forward for trans rights in Ireland and will greatly increase the visibility and respect of trans people.

The Act makes provisions for 16 and 17 year olds to be legally recognised which is very important as it honours these young people’s identities. Legal recognition will also require schools to treat these students according to their preferred gender and not the one assigned at birth.
Trans people are coming out at younger ages and there is a growing cohort of young trans people in the education system. Children and young people spend the majority of their time in an educational setting. Young people under 16 are particularly vulnerable in primary and post-primary schools as they will be unable to attain legal recognition and the associated protections. TENI will be advocating for their inclusion in the two-year review of the Gender Recognition Act. However, in the meantime it is important that they are supported in the education system.

This resource seeks to outline the challenges that young trans people face in education and share their experiences in order to ensure that their voices are included in policy development. The resource ends with key recommendations on how to address these issues practically and comprehensively.

**BACKGROUND**

**Gender Identity Development**

“As gender development progresses in children, an acceptance and personal expression of a gender identity occurs. Traditionally, this has been called the core gender identity. Evidence suggests that this expression usually takes place by age 2-3 years. The gender role may not necessarily be well defined until age 5 years, although, in some cases, it is evident earlier.”

“Lucy was three years old when she first told us that she was not a boy but a girl. At first, my ex-husband and myself thought it was just childish chatter and used to tell her ‘no, you’re a boy’, but she wouldn’t give up. She kept saying she was a girl, over and over.”

Trans people are increasingly articulating their gender identity at a younger age. While some argue that these young people are too immature to make such declarations, new research suggests this is not the case. A recent study with 32 trans children, aged 5 to 12, found that the gender identity of these children was deeply held and was not the result of confusion about gender identity. The researchers noted, “[O]ur results support the notion that transgender children are not confused, delayed, showing gender-atypical responding, pretending, or oppositional — they instead show responses entirely typical and expected for children with their gender identity.”

International research suggests that the majority of older trans people were aware of their gender identity at a young age. Riley et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative study that documented the childhood experiences of trans adults retrospectively (N=110). They found that 94% had identified their gender before the age of 18: 48% reported identifying their gender between 0-5 years of age, 44% identified their gender between 6-12 years old and 2% identified their gender between 13-18. Only 2% identified their gender after 18 (and 4% did not reply).

In the United Kingdom, Kennedy’s study (2010) found that trans people on average became aware of their gender identity at around 8 years old. The percentage of trans people who came to the realisation of their gender variance at age 18 or later was less than 4%, with 76% of participants being aware they were trans or gender variant before they left primary school.

There are significant individual variations with regards to age of awareness. In some children, awareness comes later, during childhood or adolescence, or not until adulthood.

Formal epidemiologic studies on gender dysphoria—in children, adolescents, and adults—are lacking. While gender dysphoria during childhood does not inevitably continue into adulthood, this appears to be much higher for adolescents. No formal prospective studies exist. However, in a follow-up study of 70 adolescents who were diagnosed with gender dysphoria and given puberty-suppressing hormones, all continued with actual gender reassignment, beginning with feminising/masculinising hormone therapy.

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7 World Professional Association for Transgender Health (2012) Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender-Nonconforming People. WPATH.
Prevalence
There is no incidence or prevalence data from Ireland or the UK on the number of trans people under 18 years of age.

The Gender Identity Research and Education Society in the UK estimate that 1% of the population have some degree of gender variance. Furthermore, the Tavistock Clinic in London which treats trans children has had a 50% increase in children being referred for treatment in the past six years. Professor Norman Spack, a paediatric endocrinologist at Boston’s Children’s Hospital, reports that children presenting for treatment for gender identity issues at his clinic increased fourfold between the years of 2007 and 2009.

Some estimates suggest that at least 1 in 500 children have a gender identity other than the one assigned to them at birth, not including those children who merely have behaviour patterns that defy gender norms.

In 2015, TENI, BeLonG To and the Irish Trans Student Alliance conducted the first ever Trans Youth Survey in Ireland. There were 161 respondents who completed the survey, ranging from 14-25 years of age. Nearly one third of respondents (N=50) were between the ages of 14-17. While this does not indicate prevalence, it suggests a much higher number of young trans people in Ireland than generally believed.

LEGAL GENDER RECOGNITION

“Gender recognition is not an abstract concept; it’s not just about a birth certificate. It’s about real people and real lives. For me it’s not about a piece of paper, it’s about Mr. Sam Blanckensee legally existing in the Irish State. I am an active participant in my community; I’m a scouter and a student leader. But in the eyes of my state, the man I have become doesn’t exist.”
– Sam Blanckensee, young trans man

“A failure to provide in law for transgender young people to have preferred gender recognised renders it more difficult to advance awareness of the serious challenges facing them in schools and in other settings. More fundamentally, it compounds the invisibility of this group of young people.”
– Advice from the Ombudsman for Children

References:
Legal gender recognition allows the formal recognition of an individual's gender identity and the issuance of a new birth certificate that reflects this change. Young trans people use their birth certificates regularly when enrolling in school and college or participating in sports. The birth certificate is linked to class roles and the CEO process. The inability for young trans people to be legally recognised in their true gender means that they are constantly at risk of being outed (their trans status disclosed) which can lead to bullying, harassment and even violence. Lack of legal recognition also fails to acknowledge a core element of these young people's identities which can exacerbate feelings of stigmatisation, isolation and exclusion.

Legal gender recognition is completely distinct from a medical transition. Formal recognition of young trans people should not be linked to medical interventions. Decisions that young people and their families make about their bodies is separate from having their true gender legally recognised.

The Experiences of Trans People in Schools

TENI, BeLonG To Youth Services and the Irish Trans Student Alliance (ITSA) organised a Trans Youth Forum in July 2015. This was the first event of its kind and 50 young people aged 14 to 25 from across Ireland participated. These young people shared their experiences in relation to education, legislation and healthcare. The goal was to ensure that the voices of young trans people and their experiences could be used in advocacy and policy development. This initiative was funded by TCD Equality and ILGA-Europe.

The Trans Youth Survey was a short and anonymous questionnaire that was completed online and through BeLonG To Youth Services. There were 161 respondents aged 14 to 25 years of age who completed the survey, making it the largest survey of young trans people in Ireland to date.

The data that is presented is derived from the Trans Youth Forum. The results of the survey are shared in the purple boxes.

Overview

For many young trans individuals, education and education-related services, are the primary influence which affects their gender identity and gender expression. The great majority of forum participants were still undertaking educational training – at either second or third level – and their interaction with schools or universities had a significant impact on all aspects of their lives.

Trans young people recount many diverse experiences within the education sector. These experiences are shaped by numerous, intersecting factors – such as institutional support, access to resources and family relationships. While it would be impossible to reduce the participants’ discussions to any one, common narrative, we can identify common themes which contribute to the collective trans experience within Ireland’s education system.

Expressing Preferred Gender in Educational Institutions

Only 26% of respondents felt that their educational institutes acknowledged their gender identity.

The great majority of forum participants reported significant obstacles in freely expressing their preferred gender in education. While in many cases, young trans individuals, who “come out” in school, receive positive support from their peers (one participant described their fellow students as “fantastic”), the overwhelming response from educational staff and administrators is negative.

The most common obstacle to expressing gender identity in educational settings is staff resistance. Non-supportive attitudes most often manifested themselves in teachers’ refusal to respect a student’s preferred name and pronoun.
School administrators often push back against recognising trans students on the basis that they need to protect the student body or an institutional ethos. In certain instances, trans young people have been warned that their gender identity could harm or intimidate classmates. One trans student was prevented from attending a school trip until they had obtained permission from all other participants. Other students have been denied access to educational services on the basis of a school ethos which makes no mention – implied or express – of trans identities. Lack of respect for student identities in the education setting created significant emotional distress for many young participants.

A large number of students reported having “no possibility” of expressing their gender identity in school. While more students are able to come out in college than in secondary school, many students still report barriers which restrict their gender expression.

Many others expressed the belief that, in their particular school environment, it would not have been safe to reveal a trans identity. Indeed, in one case, a young trans person, who had come out during secondary education, was violently assaulted by other students.

Respect for Preferred Name and Pronoun

Irish trans students report mixed experiences in terms of respect for preferred pronouns and names. As with general expressions of gender identity, trans students report resistance among educational institutions and staff members in respecting their preferred names and pronouns. The majority of forum participants stated that their school would not change official records without a deed poll. This results in trans students expressing and presenting with one identity while interacting with teachers and administrators. This can cause significant levels of stress and anxiety. This also means that, where students have formed meaningful relationships with classmates according to their preferred gender, they run a continuous risk of beingouted anytime official information is published. The requirement to obtain a deed poll expressly discriminates against poorer and non-national students, who may lack sufficient resources or institutional knowledge to undertake the process of legally changing names.

In addition to official recognition, some education providers also refuse to respect their students’ identities in less formal settings. A number of young people spoke about being in class with a large number of cisgender female students. Even though the individual had informed their professors about their male identity, the professors insisted on collectively referring to the group as “girls” or “ladies”. Many young people stated that such experiences were humiliating, devalued their self-worth and made them feel like they had no place within the classroom.

School Uniforms and Dress Codes

Only 16% of respondents said they were able to wear a uniform specific to their gender identity.

School uniforms, and other gendered clothing, have a significant impact on trans young people within Ireland’s education system. A large number of forum participants reported restrictions on wearing preferred uniforms. In some cases, prohibitions are absolute. A trans female cannot wear a uniform designated for girls, and a trans male is unable to use a uniform for boys.

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In some cases, students arranged a compromise with their school. One student noted that, although he was not allowed to wear the uniform designated for male students, he was allowed to attend school in the official sports tracksuit. While, for the young person concerned, this option was preferable to wearing a skirt, such “third” options reinforce the marginalisation of trans children in Ireland’s schools.

The optimal approach, as implemented by a number of schools with best practice models, is to respect a student’s identity and choice of uniform. Forum participants who were entitled to wear gender appropriate uniforms in secondary school reported a better educational experience. One young person noted: “I wore the uniform that I wanted in my school, and wore a tuxedo to my debs. There was no hassle.”

Gender Segregated Facilities (Toilets and Locker Rooms)

Only 18% of students felt their gender was respected in terms of their use of gender segregated facilities such as bathrooms and locker rooms.

In addition to gendered clothing, the use of gender-segregated facilities also creates significant difficulties for trans students in Ireland. Almost all forum participants attended a school where bathrooms and locker areas were divided between two binary genders. An inability to access facilities which align with one’s gender identity is a central concern for trans young people.

“Bathrooms cause me so much stress! Other students question me and make it difficult.”

Trans students experience numerous obstacles to using appropriate gender-segregated facilities. In some schools, staff expressly prohibit trans people from using their preferred facility. Young trans women may be required to access male changing rooms where they experience heightened levels of aggression and harassment. School officials may restrict access to preferred facilities, but make available a third option, such as a disabled toilet or the staff bathroom. Like third option uniforms, many forum participants complained that being required to use an alternative bathroom separated them from their peers. Many students felt like they were being dishonest by using the disabled toilet. In some cases, young persons expressed a belief that requiring students to use disabled bathrooms legitimised misconceptions about trans persons being mentally unstable or unwell.

Some trans youth reported self-selecting into a staff or disabled bathroom because it allowed them to avoid teasing, taunting or harassment in general student facilities. This was due to the fact that in using either their preferred facility or the facility associated with their assigned gender, trans students experience staring, laughter, abusive comments and open confrontation. In many cases, other students would leave a bathroom en masse when a trans young person entered.

Even where trans students do not confront express hostility, numerous environmental factors create a hostile space. Many forum participants referred to the unique challenges which young trans men experience in male bathrooms. One individual spoke of feeling humiliation when he had to leave a male restroom because there were only urinals: “The other guys gave me stares as if to say ‘just use the urinal.’” Similarly, numerous individuals spoke about the difficulty in changing sanitary towels without proper disposal units in male toilets: “There is a continual fear that somebody will discover what I’m doing...I keep thinking ‘oh my god! Somebody is about to look under the door!’”

Almost all forum participants expressed frustration at the absence of gender neutral bathrooms in their educational setting. This concern was most acutely voiced by non-binary individuals, who felt that existing male/female options amounted to institutional erasure of their identities. However, even among those who do not identify as non-binary, there was a sharp preference for gender neutral facilities which de-emphasised gender as the gate-keeper of access and encouraged cisgender students away from overt gender policing. Few, if any, secondary schools provide students with an express “gender neutral” option. Facilities which are open to male and female students are often only available as a disabled option.
The failure to provide non-male/female restroom options can have negative health consequences. Numerous participants recounted abstaining from bathroom use for several hours because they were unable to locate an appropriate toilet.

**Extra-curricular Activities**

Only 9% of participants felt their gender identity was respected in terms of sports teams/physical education classes and 14% reported they felt respected in terms of extra-curricular activities/outings/school tours.

Trans young people report that their gender identity noticeably curbs their participation in extra-curricular activities, particularly sport. Across both secondary and third level education, dividing activities along gendered lines means that large numbers of trans students are unable to meaningfully engage in non-educational pursuits.

A striking number of participants either did not take up, or ceased, involvement in sports as a consequence of expressing their preferred gender. One young person “stopped playing sport because of segregation” while another youth “never took up boxing or rowing, the two sports that [they] would be interested in.” Trans young people give two main reasons for abstaining from sport. First, individuals are often prevented from engaging in activities according to their preferred gender. A number of young trans men noted that, even after they had completed a process of social and medical transition, they were still unable to join men’s sports teams. This placed the individuals in a state of limbo. For reasons of (supposed) safety, they were separated from other men. Yet, they also felt uncomfortable, and indeed were frequently not welcome, competing against females. Second, even where trans young people are not subject to express limits on joining sports teams, individuals are often coerced by social pressure to self-select out of sport. Many participants noted that, while there was no overt gender segregation during their physical education classes at school, students automatically divided upon gendered lines and it would have been unthinkable for most trans people to play with their preferred gender.

The overwhelming majority of forum participants attended an educational institution where there was no formalised, published policy on gender identity and gender expression. Students stated that there was either an express absence of trans-focused guidelines or no information as to whether school administrators had adopted trans-related policies.

“My secondary school certainly did not have a trans inclusive bullying policy, to be honest, I can’t even imagine the day when they would go down that road!”

In many schools, trans issues were simply not within administrators sphere of consciousness. Even in schools which had adopted sexual orientation policies, there was either no realisation that officials should also consider gender identity or an assumption that trans students would be protected by rules introduced for gay and lesbian youth.

The failure to adopt trans-focused policies has significant negative consequences for trans students. Having never considered gender identity in a meaningful way, many schools struggle to take clear and coherent steps where students subsequently reveal their trans identity. In many cases, schools and universities which are confronted with a trans student often rely upon highly reactionary and ultimately insufficient responses. One forum participant stated that, when they came out as trans, the absence of any clear guidelines for LGBT youth resulted in staff “making up the rules as they went along.”

Many young people suggested that, by failing to enact trans policies, and to meaningfully engage in a dialogue on gender identity, school administrators were effectively condoning anti-trans discrimination. In the absence of fact-based discussion and guidelines, many students learn about gender identity solely through the lens of abusive slurs.

“When it comes to transgender people, no information is always bad information.”

Only 15% of participants said that their educational institute had specific policies to protect trans students.

School Curriculum

Many participants felt that introducing trans-focused policies was not only necessary to protect trans young people, it would also allow staff and cisgender students to begin meaningful conversations about gender identity and gender diversity. This is all the more pressing because, for the great majority of forum participants, trans people and trans issues had not been properly covered as part of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in secondary school. In many cases, teachers simply refused to discuss any sexual orientation or gender identity topic during SPHE lessons. In other, rarer situations, gender and sexual diversity was presented in a compressed, trivialised form which often devalued the experience of trans persons and contributed to a system of othering non-cisgender identities.

The Importance of Context
Throughout the discussions on education, many young trans individuals continuously returned to the importance of context. Many had enjoyed positive, life-affirming experiences in second level education. These experiences may be both related and unrelated to a person’s gender identity. They include positive acts of extreme kindness and support, but have also arisen where a student is merely allowed to live their life without constant consideration of gender identity.

In the great majority of cases, where trans youth have experienced kindness or affirmation within educational settings, the student involved was a pains to emphasise the specific context of their story. Acts of support were often carried out by one particularly understanding staff member or friend. Where a young person discovered an ally within a school administration, they frequently began conducting all official school business through that individual. While this afforded students an enhanced educational experience, it did not reflect wider trans-focused attitudes within an institution. Indeed, many forum participants noted that, where they experienced support, it was often in the face of more general transphobia. In some cases, young trans people, who had previously been supported by sympathetic staff members, were required to radically change their behaviour when those officials left a school. Many people refused to disclose their gender identity until they were certain how the other party would react. Once again, in such situations, the absence of any widespread abuse is not evidence of general acceptance for trans people within Ireland’s education system.

POLICY IN CONTEXT

School Policies in Ireland

In January 2016, GLEN and the Department of Education and Skills published ‘Being LGBT in School’ (www.glen.ie), a resource for post-primary schools to prevent homophobic and transphobic bullying and support LGBT students. This document provides practical guidance for schools in relation to trans students and was done in consultation with TENI. The document acknowledges that some schools may find the process of supporting a trans student challenging and outlines the key areas for which the trans student will need support specific to trans issues. The document advocates appropriate staff training as well as educating students on gender identity and expression. It explains the importance of having a transition plan, and how to tailor those transition plans for both co-educational and single sex schools. While this resource provides viable suggestions that are based on good practice, comprehensive guidelines should be developed.

TENI is available to provide individual consultations and tailored trainings to primary and post-primary schools to equip them with the tools to support trans students.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Schools must provide a safe, supportive and affirming environment for trans students. The primary objective should be to allow the student to continue their education with the minimal amount of distraction to the trans student or their peers.

The following recommendations are based on international good practice:

Preferred Name and Pronoun: Trans students should be addressed by school staff by the name and pronoun corresponding to their gender identity. This would acknowledge and affirm a young trans person’s identity and also support their mental health and wellbeing.

School Uniforms and Dress Codes: Schools should respect a student’s identity and choice of uniform. Where possible, uniforms should be gender neutral and be presented as a dress code for all students rather than listing the items of clothing for girls or boys. This would eliminate any distress for trans students, especially those who do not wish to publicly declare themselves as trans.

Gender Segregated Facilities: Students should be allowed to use the bathroom or locker room according to their gender identity. Where this is not possible, reasonable efforts should be made to accommodate the student in a dignified way. Schools should also explore the possibility of gender-neutral facilities.

Sports and Physical Education: Trans students should be provided the same opportunities to participate in sports and physical education as all other students. In schools where students are separated by gender for the purpose of P.E., trans students should be allowed to join the group according to their gender identity. When competing in inter-schools tournaments or with external sporting bodies, negotiations on an individual basis may be necessary.

Extra-Curricular Activities: Trans students should be encouraged to participate in extra-curricular activities. Where students are separated by gender in school activities (i.e. overnight field trips), trans students should be permitted to participate in accordance with their gender identity.

School Curriculum: The school curriculum should include clear explanations of trans identities. The SPHE syllabus should be revised and the teaching of it should not be an optional module. The curriculum should encourage the challenging of traditional gender stereotyping and age-appropriate discussions on LGBT experiences.

Staff Training: Schools should make reasonable efforts to educate their staff on trans issues and show leadership in how to create a safe environment for trans students. School counsellors should be knowledgeable about trans issues before they attempt to offer counselling.

Trans Policies: The Department of Education and Skills should develop and distribute clear guidelines that address the needs of trans students and support them in their daily lives. This should include good practice in relation to gender segregated facilities, sports participation, extra-curricular activities, etc. Schools should also create and enforce non-discrimination and anti-bullying/harassment policies that explicitly protect gender identity and gender expression.

Transition Plan: Trans students may choose to transition in schools. A transition plan should be developed in conjunction with the school and the key people in the student’s life, including their family. The plan should include the date of transition, how the other students will be informed, name and pronoun use and toilet and changing room arrangements.